



Half a War (Shattered Sea)

By Joe Abercrombie

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NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *BUZZFEED*

AND *THE INDEPENDENT* • *New York Times* bestselling author Joe Abercrombie delivers the stunning conclusion to the epic fantasy trilogy that began with *Half a King*, praised by George R. R. Martin as “a fast-paced tale of betrayal and revenge that grabbed me from page 1 and refused to let go.”

“The Shattered Seas trilogy has worked its way into a very exclusive group of my favorite fantasy novels of all time.”—James Dashner, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Maze Runner*

Words are weapons.

Princess Skara has seen all she loved made blood and ashes. She is left with only words. But the right words can be as deadly as any blade. If she is to reclaim her birthright, she must conquer her fears and sharpen her wits to a lethal edge.

Only half a war is fought with swords.

The deeply cunning Father Yarvi has walked a long road from crippled slave to king’s minister. He has made allies of old foes and stitched together an uneasy peace. But now the ruthless Grandmother Wexen has raised the greatest army since the elves made war on God, and put Bright Yilling at its head—a man who worships only Death.

Sometimes one must fight evil with evil.

Some—like Thorn Bathu and the sword-bearer Raith—are born to fight, perhaps to die. Others—like Brand the smith and Koll the wood-carver—would rather stand in the light. But when Mother War spreads her iron wings, she may cast the whole Shattered Sea into darkness.

Praise for *Half a War*

“Filled with swift battles, quick plot twists and witty dialogue.”—*New York Daily News*

“A fantasy for all ages, and all times [that] rends the soul as compulsively as anything Abercrombie has written to date . . . *Half a War* is a success in every way, putting a stupendous capstone on the entire Shattered Sea Trilogy.”—***Tor.com***

“There’s all the sword-swinging and Machiavellian machinations you could ask for in this tale of a final battle between countries and kings.”—***Fredericksburg Free Lance–Star***

“Engaging, mesmerising and jaw-dropping.”—***SciFi Now***

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Half the World

“Another entertaining burst of battle, magic and political machinations from the always reliable Joe Abercrombie . . . a thoroughgoing blast, a violent, beautiful rabbit hole of craft that is well worth disappearing into.”—***Shelf Awareness***

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Editorial Review

Review

“The Shattered Seas trilogy has worked its way into a very exclusive group of my favorite fantasy novels of all time. The pacing is perfect, the characters deep and true and real, the world rich and authentic, the plot full of twists and turns. Perhaps my favorite part is that no one is purely good or evil: Each and every character has layers upon layers that are a joy to discover. I tore through all three books and truly hope that someday Joe Abercrombie returns to this magnificent, captivating world.”—**James Dashner, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Maze Runner***

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“Tremendously entertaining . . . lightning-fast and filled with a wonderful collection of rogues, villains and two-faced bastards . . . From the first chapter [Abercrombie] wastes no time as the reader is swept up in a gripping tale of betrayal and revenge.”—**SciFi Now**

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“An excellent page-turner . . . full of drama and energy.”—**New York Daily News**

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About the Author

Joe Abercrombie is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Half a King*, *Half the World*, *Red Country* and the First Law trilogy: *The Blade Itself*, *Before They Are Hanged*, and *Last Argument of Kings*. He spent ten years as a freelance film editor, and is now a full-time writer who lives in Bath, England, with his wife, two daughters, and son.

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The Fall

“We have lost,” said King Fynn, staring into his ale.

As she looked out at the empty hall, Skara knew there was no denying it. Last summer, the gathered heroes had threatened to lift the roof beams with their bloodthirsty boasting, their songs of glory, their promises of victory over the High King’s rabble.

As men so often do, they had proved fiercer talkers than fighters. After an idle, inglorious, and unprofitable few months they had slunk away one by one, leaving a handful of the luckless lurking about the great firepit, its flames guttering as low as the fortunes of Throvenland. Where once the many-columned Forest had thronged with warriors, now it was peopled with shadows. Crowded with disappointments.

They had lost. And they had not even fought a battle.

Mother Kyre, of course, saw it differently. “We have come to terms, my king,” she corrected, nibbling at her meat as primly as an old mare at a hay bale.

“Terms?” Skara stabbed furiously at her own uneaten food. “My father died to hold Bail’s Point, and you’ve given its key to Grandmother Wexen without a blow struck. You’ve promised the High King’s warriors free passage across our land! What do you think ‘lost’ would look like?”

Mother Kyre turned her gaze on Skara with the usual infuriating calmness. “Your grandfather dead in his howe, the women of Yaletoft weeping over the corpses of their sons, this hall made ashes and you, princess, wearing a slave’s collar shackled to the High King’s chair. That is what I think ‘lost’ would look like. Which is why I say come to terms.”

Stripped of his pride, King Fynn sagged like a sail without a mast. Skara had always thought her grandfather as unconquerable as Father Earth. She could not bear to see him like this. Or perhaps she could not bear to see how childish her belief in him had been.

She watched him swill down more ale, and belch, and toss his gilded cup aside to be refilled. “What do you say, Blue Jenner?”

“In such royal company as this, my king, as little as I can.”

Blue Jenner was a shifty old beggar, more raider than trader, his face as crudely chiseled, weathered and cracked as an old prow-beast. Had Skara been in charge he would not have been allowed on her docks, let alone at her high table.

Mother Kyre, of course, saw it differently. “A captain is like a king, but of a ship rather than a country. Your

experience might benefit Princess Skara.”

The indignity of it. “A lesson in politics from a pirate,” Skara muttered to herself, “and not even a successful one.”

“Don’t mumble. How many hours have I spent teaching you the proper way for a princess to speak? For a queen to speak?” Mother Kyre raised her chin and made her voice echo effortlessly from the rafters. “If you judge your thoughts worth hearing, pronounce them proudly, push them to every corner of the chamber, fill the hall with your hopes and desires and make every listener share them! If you are ashamed of your thoughts, better to leave a silence. A smile costs nothing. You were saying?”

“Well .??.” Blue Jenner scratched at the few gray hairs still clinging to his weather-spotted scalp, evidently a place unknown to combs. “Grandmother Wexen’s crushed the rebellion in the Lowlands.”

“With the help of this dog of hers, Bright Yilling, who worships no god but Death.” Skara’s grandfather snatched up his cup while the thrall was still pouring, ale spilling across the table. “They say he lined the road to Skekenhouse with hanged men.”

“The High King’s eyes turn north,” Jenner went on. “He’s keen to bring Uthil and Grom-gil-Gorm to heel and Throvenland .??.”

“Is in the way,” finished Mother Kyre. “Don’t slouch, Skara, it is unseemly.”

Skara scowled, but she wriggled her shoulders up the chair a little anyway, closer to the board-stiff, neck-stretched, horribly unnatural pose the minister approved of. Sit as if you have a knife to your throat, she always said. The role of a princess is not to be comfortable.

“I’m a man used to living free, and I’m no lover of Grandmother Wexen, or her One God, or her taxes, or her rules.” Blue Jenner rubbed mournfully at his lopsided jaw. “But when Mother Sea whips up the storm, a captain does what he must to save what he can. Freedom’s worth nothing to the dead. Pride’s worth little even to the living.”

“Wise words.” Mother Kyre wagged her finger at Skara. “The beaten can win tomorrow. The dead have lost forever.”

“Wisdom and cowardice can be hard to tell apart,” snapped Skara.

The minister clenched her jaw. “I swear I taught you wiser manners than to insult a guest. Nobility is shown not by the respect one is given by the highest, but the respect one gives to the lowly. Words are weapons. They should be handled with proper care.”

Jenner waved any suggestion of offense gently away. “No doubt Princess Skara has the right of it. I’ve known many men far braver’n me.” He gave a sad smile, displaying a crooked set of teeth with several gaps. “And seen most buried, one by one.”

“Bravery and long life rarely make good bedfellows,” said the king, draining his cup again.

“Kings and ale pair up no better,” said Skara.

"I have nothing left but ale, granddaughter. My warriors have abandoned me. My allies have deserted me. They swore fair-weather oaths, oak-firm while Mother Sun shone, prone to wilt when the clouds gather."

That was no secret. Day after day Skara had watched the docks, eager to see how many ships the Iron King Uthil of Gettland would bring, how many warriors would accompany the famous Grom-gil-Gorm of Vansterland. Day after day, as the leaves budded, then the leaves cast dappled shade, then the leaves turned brown and fell. They never came.

"Loyalty is common in dogs but rare in men," observed Mother Kyre. "A plan that relies on loyalty is worse than none at all."

"What then?" asked Skara. "A plan that relies on cowardice?"

Old, her grandfather looked as he turned to her with misty eyes and brewer's breath. Old and beaten. "You have always been brave, Skara. Braver than I. No doubt the blood of Bail flows in your veins."

"Your blood too, my king! You always told me only half a war is fought with swords. The other half is fought here." And Skara pressed one fingertip into the side of her head, so hard it hurt.

"You have always been clever, Skara. Cleverer than I. The gods know you can talk the birds down from the sky when it pleases you. Fight that half of the war, then. Give me the deep cunning that can turn back the High King's armies and save our land and our people from Bright Yilling's sword. That can spare me from the shame of Grandmother Wexen's terms."

Skara looked down at the straw-covered floor, face burning. "I wish I could." But she was a girl seventeen winters old and, Bail's blood or no, her head held no hero's answers. "I'm sorry, Grandfather."

"So am I, child." King Fynn slumped back and beckoned for more ale. "So am I."

"Skara."

She was snatched from troubled dreams and into darkness, Mother Kyre's face ghostly in the light of one flickering candle.

"Skara, get up."

She fumbled back the furs, clumsy with sleep. Strange sounds outside. Shouting and laughter.

She rubbed her eyes. "What is it?"

"You must go with Blue Jenner."

Skara saw the trader then, lurking in the doorway of her bedchamber. A black figure, shaggy-headed, eyes turned to the floor.

"What?"

Mother Kyre pulled her up by her arm. "You must go now."

Skara was about to argue. As she always argued. Then she saw the minister's expression and it made her obey without a word spoken. She had never seen Mother Kyre afraid before.

It did not sound like laughter anymore, outside. Crying. Wild voices. "What's happening?" she managed to croak.

"I made a terrible mistake." Mother Kyre's eyes darted to the door and back. "I trusted Grandmother Wexen." She twisted the gold ring from Skara's arm. The one Bail the Builder once wore into battle, its ruby glistening dark as new-spilled blood in the candlelight. "This is for you." She held it out to Blue Jenner. "If you swear to see her safe to Thorlby."

The raider's eyes flickered guiltily up as he took it. "I swear it. A sun-oath and a moon-oath."

Mother Kyre clutched painfully hard at both of Skara's hands. "Whatever happens, you must live. That is your duty now. You must live and you must lead. You must fight for Throvenland. You must stand for her people if .?.?. if there is no one else."

Skara's throat was so tight with fear she could hardly speak. "Fight? But—"

"I have taught you how. I have tried to. Words are weapons." The minister wiped tears from Skara's face that she had not even realized she had cried. "Your grandfather was right, you are brave and you are clever. But now you must be strong. You are a child no longer. Always remember, the blood of Bail flows in your veins. Now go."

Skara padded barefoot through the darkness at Blue Jenner's heels, shivering in her shift, Mother Kyre's lessons so deep-rooted that even fearing for her life she worried over whether she was properly dressed. Flames beyond the narrow windows cast stabbing shadows across the straw-scattered floor. She heard panicked shouts. A dog barking, suddenly cut off. A heavy thudding as of a tree being felled.

As of axes at the door.

They stole into the guest room, where warriors had slept shoulder to shoulder a few months before. Now there was only Blue Jenner's threadbare blanket.

"What's happening?" she whispered, hardly recognizing her own voice it came so thin and cracked.

"Bright Yilling has come with his Companions," said Jenner, "to settle Grandmother Wexen's debts. Yaletoft is already burning. I'm sorry, princess."

Skara flinched as he slid something around her neck. A collar of twisted silver wire, a fine chain clinking faintly. The kind the Ingling girl who used to bind her hair had worn.

"Am I a slave?" she whispered, as Jenner buckled the other end about his wrist.

"You must seem to be."

Skara shrank back at a crash outside, the clash of metal, and Jenner pressed her against the wall. He blew his candle out and dropped them into darkness. She saw him draw a knife, Father Moon glinting on its edge.

Howls now, beyond the door, high and horrible, the bellows of beasts not the voices of men. Skara squeezed her eyes shut, tears stinging the lids, and prayed. Mumbling, stuttering, meaningless prayers. Prayers to every god and none.

It is easy to be brave when the Last Door seems tiny for its distance, a far-off thing for other folk to worry about. Now she felt Death's chill breath on her neck and it froze the courage in her. How freely she had talked of cowardice the night before. Now she understood what it was.

A last long shriek, then silence almost worse than the noise had been. She felt herself drawn forward, Jenner's breath stale on her cheek.

"We have to go."

"I'm scared," she breathed.

"So am I. But if we face 'em boldly we might talk our way free. If they find us hiding .??.?"

You can only conquer your fears by facing them, her grandfather used to say. Hide from them, and they conquer you. Jenner eased the door creaking open and Skara forced herself through after him, her knees trembling so badly they were nearly knocking together.

Her bare foot slid in something wet. A dead man sat beside the door, the straw all about him black with blood.

Borid, his name. A warrior who had served her father. He had carried Skara on his shoulders when she was little, so she could reach the peaches in the orchard under the walls of Bail's Point.

Her stinging eyes crept toward the sound of voices. Over broken weapons and cloven shields. Over more corpses, hunched, sprawled, spread-eagled among the carved columns after which her grandfather's hall was called the Forest.

Figures were gathered in the light of the guttering firepit. Storied warriors, mail and weapons and ring-money gleaming with the colors of fire, their great shadows stretching out across the floor toward her.

Mother Kyre stood among them, and Skara's grandfather too, ill-fitting mail hastily dragged on, gray hair still wild from his bed. Smiling blandly upon his two prisoners was a slender warrior with a soft, handsome face, as careless as a child's, a space about him where even these other killers dared not tread.

Bright Yilling, who worshipped no god but Death.

His voice echoed jauntily in the vastness of the hall. "I was hoping to pay my respects to Princess Skara."

"She has gone to her cousin Laithlin," said Mother Kyre. The same voice that had calmly lectured, corrected, chastised Skara every day of her life, but with an unfamiliar warble of terror in it now. "Where you will never reach her."

"Oh, we will reach her there," said one of Yilling's warriors, a huge man with a neck like a bull's.

"Soon enough, Mother Kyre, soon enough," said another with a tall spear and a horn at his belt.

“King Uthil will come,” she said. “He will burn your ships and drive you back into the sea.”

“How will he burn my ships when they are safe behind the great chains at Bail’s Point?” asked Yilling. “The chains you gave me the key to.”

“Grom-gil-Gorm will come,” she said, but her voice had faded almost to a whisper.

“I hope it will be so.” Yilling reached out with both hands and ever so gently eased Mother Kyre’s hair back over her shoulders. “But he will come too late for you.” He drew a sword, a great diamond in a golden claw for a pommel, mirror-steel flashing so bright in the darkness it left a white smear across Skara’s sight.

“Death waits for us all.” King Fynn took a long breath through his nose, and proudly drew himself up. A glimpse of the man he used to be. He looked about the hall and, through the columns, caught Skara’s eye, and it seemed to her he gave the slightest smile. Then he dropped to his knees. “Today you kill a king.”

Yilling shrugged. “Kings and peasants. We all look the same to Death.”

He stabbed Skara’s grandfather where his neck met his shoulder, blade darting in to the hilt and back out, quick and deadly as lightning falls. King Fynn made only a dry squeak he died so fast, and toppled face forward into the firepit. Skara stood frozen, her breath held fast, her mind held fast.

Mother Kyre stared down at her master’s corpse. “Grandmother Wexen gave me her promise,” she stammered out.

Pit pat, pit pat, the blood dripped from the point of Yilling’s sword. “Promises only bind the weak.”

Users Review

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David Soto:

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